



MCADSV RESPONSE TO COERCIVE ABORTION PREVENTION ACT

My name is Angelita Velasco Gunn and I am with the Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. I am testifying today in opposition to the package of bills that make up the Coercive Abortion Prevention Act.

I have for over 21 years worked in the field of domestic violence and understand the complexity of the lives of domestic violence victims. As a movement, we recognize that women who are pregnant are at high risk of being battered during this most vulnerable time. We also understand and agree that coercion is one of many tactics used by batterers to control, intimidate and threaten their partners. To make the assertion, however, that survivors are coerced into aborting pregnancies and therefore need civil protections is misguided, at the least, and at the most could have dangerous consequences for survivors.

A pregnancy in a relationship where there is domestic violence gives the batterer opportunity to exercise additional control over the survivor as it often creates an emotional bond between the perpetrator and the victim; or assures that the batterer will have continued and ongoing access to the victim through the children. In fact, batterers commonly force women to have children, through violence (rape), coercion (promising things will get better with children or worse if she refuses to have children) or deceit (sabotaging birth control). The pregnancy (and the child born) are used by the abuser to further control and abuse the victim. Unfortunately our child custody, adoption and social welfare laws offer few remedies to this form of abuse.

Our work with survivors includes supporting them in regaining and maintaining autonomy in all aspects of their lives. This includes providing every possible protection for domestic violence survivors who are pregnant and want to have a child.

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This also means preserving options for those who decide that it is not in their best interest to have a child.

The vast majority of domestic violence survivors who feel "coerced" into terminating a pregnancy, or considering this option, are forced to consider this option not because of threats from the batterer (who would more often than not, try to prevent her from exercising this legal right), but rather because she may feel she lacks the resources necessary to provide for her child, such as employment, employment training, safe child care, housing and health care. She may also fear that the batterer will seek and gain custody (which is a reality for many domestic violence victims). She may ponder what the child's life will be like in a home where she has been threatened, controlled and harmed; and the child could witness or be abused themselves.

Finally, if a domestic violence survivor has been coerced into seeking an abortion through threats of violence, and she decides she is willing to take the risks inherent in disclosing this information, criminal and civil remedies already exist for her protection under current Stalking Laws and other laws, and I will defer to the attorneys here to testify further on the protections that exist.

We understand that the supporters of these bills are intending to offer protections for domestic violence victims through this legislation but we strongly believe that these bills would have serious negative consequences for these individuals. Thank you.

Survivor Story from Program in St. Clair County

The client is a 33 year old African American female who fled from her abuser to a domestic violence shelter/service agency with her four children. The abuser was her long time partner. The women had been with her partner for 16 years. She identified all of her children as being the product of rape.

Prior to her coming to shelter she discovered she was pregnant again with his child. This pregnancy was also the result of rape. She disclosed to shelter staff her situation and wanted to discuss her options. She was afraid to tell him she was pregnant because (she knew) he would (likely) force her to continue the pregnancy. He told her on several occasions that the more children she had the less likely she was to leave him. He told her, as she reported, that he did this to her to keep her with him. (He would say) saying things like "Nobody wants to be with a baby mamma" and "My kids, my woman, my way bitch so you will have to take my shit" these comments were made to her each time she found out she was pregnant as well as throughout the relationship whenever she tried to leave.

She also disclosed that she had had a prior abortion and told him that it was a miscarriage. He later found out through the friend that took her and lent her the money (to terminate the pregnancy) that actually the pregnancy was terminated. She was physically assaulted and brutally raped as "punishment" for lying to him and as he put it "for murder".

After that he told her children what she had done and verbally berated her for months about it. She left him after finding out she was pregnant again. She told staff that she could not bring another child into the relationship due to the abuse and wanted to end the pregnancy. She blamed herself for what her children had experienced through this as well. Due to the abuse in the home (Child Protection Services) CPS had investigated the family several times. She felt like this was her only option.

The woman had the abortion and did not return to her partner. She did not return due to fear and for the benefit of her four children. She left shelter with a job and a new place so that they all could start over.